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Translating research into theatre: *Nanay: a testimonial play*

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TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO THEATRE: *Nanay: A Testimonial Play*

By Geraldine Pratt and Caleb Johnston

We want to tell you about a collaboration with which we have been involved,¹ among geographers, theatre artists, and community activists. Collectively, we transformed conventional research interview transcripts into a play, performed in 2009, first at the PuSh International Performance Arts Festival in Vancouver and then at the “Your Nanny Hates You!” Festival in Berlin. We did this not only to disseminate research but also to work with the affective power of words and staging in a theatrical setting. Two events, only weeks before our second development workshop in July 2008, heightened our appreciation of the complexity of the challenges we faced in doing this. When we expressed to our dramaturge, Martin Kinch, a desire for minimal theatricality, he responded: “If you want the text to speak for itself, why not just publish it? Why move to performance?” He also said: “When you go into the realm of live performance you can’t bank on the compelling nature of words.” The following week, the University of British Columbia Research Ethics Board asked: “Do you have permission to use the material from the earlier study [to create the play]? It can only be used again with permission from the original study. If you did not receive consent [from those you interviewed] to use the data in future studies you cannot use it [in this way].” The issue was eventually resolved when the play was conceived as a “knowledge translation initiative.” Like any translation, ours was far from straightforward: the protocols of research line up imperfectly with those of theatre, and live performance is so much more than words. The title of our play, *Nanay*, is Tagalog for “mother” but also suggests the English word “nanny.” Thus, it intimates both the possibilities and

¹ We co-wrote the script, and Caleb produced the play through his production company, Urban Crawl Performance Society.

uncertainties of cross-cultural communication, and it is these, as well as the complexity, interest, and excitement involved in translating interview material into a play, that we take up here.

Nanay comes at the end of fifteen years of research by Geraldine Pratt into domestic care work. This research investigates both the difficulties faced by Canadian parents in finding good dependable childcare and the temporary work visa program that brings many Philippine women to Canada to work as live-in caregivers. Work on the Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP) has been conducted in collaboration with a community organization, the Philippine Women Centre of BC (PWC), and is fostered by mutual concerns about the politics of a middle-class white academic speaking on behalf of marginalized Philippine women.

Although the politics of knowledge creation and distribution have been central to this research program, transforming research data into a theatrical performance raised new concerns about representation. As academics we write with a particular audience in mind; however, in writing for the theatre, much less is left to the imagination. Audience members are present and their relationships with the text, the actors, and each other give meaning to the performance. A theatrical performance engages the audience in ways that few of us anticipate for our academic writing, producing an emotional attachment to and identification with at least some of the characters and stories. In developing *Nanay*, we vigorously debated the need for, as well as the capacity of, audience members to identify with Canadians who employ Filipina domestic workers. This was especially pertinent to one scene, in which husband and wife voice paternalistic attitudes towards their nanny. An excerpt from their dialogue gives a sense of this:

RICHARD: When Stephen was six months old, we chose a Filipino nanny because we heard that they were very caring for the very young ones. So we basically only interviewed Filipino nannies.

STEPHANIE: We found out about Marlena from a friend of ours. How we worked it out was like this: we had two bedrooms upstairs and one room that we used as an office. So

we sacrificed that. In that information booklet it told what a live-in caregiver is entitled to have. And it was a room with sleeping arrangements, and a lock on the door. Although no one's ever locked the door.

RICHARD: And then we also gave her separate bathroom facilities. And she didn't need a separate phone, but we gave her one. We gave her a TV, a desk, an answering machine. It's different than working in Singapore or Hong Kong. Marlena told us stories of where the nannies were sleeping. It wasn't a pretty scene.

STEPHANIE: They're treated like second-class citizens in other countries!

RICHARD: At first she wanted to call us "Madam" and "Sir"! But we said, "Wooahhh, wait a minute." I think she was kind of taken aback by that! And we said to her, "That's not the Canadian way."

STEPHANIE: More than anything, we've become friends.

RICHARD: Yeah, we wanted to break the ice.



Figure 1. Richard (Patrick Keating) and Stephanie (Alexa Divine) tell about being good employers.
Photograph by Caleb Johnston.

This exchange accommodates a comedic parody, an opportunity that the director, Alex Ferguson, took up through choice of set, selection of costumes, emphasis on particular words, tone of voice, gestures, and gloating glances between husband and wife (Figure 1) – to the

dismay of the researcher who did the actual interview and knew its context and tone. To resolve this disagreement over staging, we removed and slightly altered any details that would allow these employers to be identified, sought out interviews with more sympathetic employers, and supplemented the scene with two others, each of which invited a less distanced relationship between the audience and Canadian employers. In one of these, two white, middle-class women elaborate upon their futile efforts to find Canadian caregivers to provide childcare; in the other, a middle-class academic tells of the pain and difficulty of arranging twenty-four-hour care for her mother who wishes to stay in her home: “I just want my mother to be as comfortable as possible and to be as happy as she can with her last days. So this is the only way we can do it.” Both of these scenes were meant to create a more complex identification with the plight of middle-class women who are struggling to secure affordable care for their children and ailing parents.

The conflict over interpretation of the Stephanie-Richard dialogue crystallized irresolvable but fascinating tensions between academic and theatre work. Social science is typically written in a realist mode in which comedy and parody are unacceptable, or at least suspect, genres. Academics have ethical and professional commitments to represent those whom they study fairly and in all of their complexity. Verbatim and documentary theatre trades on this truthfulness, and staging that departs from the original context compromises its honesty. However, theatre and social science prioritize different kinds of responsibility to different kinds of subjects – theatre’s foremost responsibility is to the audience, while social science’s is to those studied – and this is reflected in the translation process. Worrying over these issues was productive and led us to consider the indeterminacy of social scientific texts. As academic writers, we select testimony that is compelling and edit it in ways that shape meaning. Although the script of *Nanay* was taken verbatim from research interviews, we edited the monologues with

a particular point in mind. One telling example is provided by the monologue that ends the play, taken from an interview with a young woman who had been separated from her mother for many years. When the two youths who, as research assistants, had interviewed the young woman first saw her story being animated in the play, they were taken aback by how we had transformed it. They noted that, in the actual interview, the young woman had been very optimistic, expressing her personal triumph over what she saw as the destiny of most children migrating through the LCP: to work in low-waged fast food restaurants. Yet, the play transformed her narrative into one of compromised success, indeed of partial failure. In particular, we measured what she counted a success – first resisting the pressure to drop out of high school in Vancouver and then completing a six-month medical assistant course – against her previous intention to enroll in a university-degree program in the Philippines. This was not a distortion, but our editing altered the “take home point” and, thus, the affective impact of the monologue. In doing so, it called into question the limits of authenticity and veracity not only in verbatim theatre but also in social scientific research. Turning research into theatre offered important insight into the effects of the routine editing typically exercised when qualitative researchers make extended use of quotes from interview transcripts as well as into the ways in which social scientists, like those who work in the theatre, also stage their material.

There is a more positive side to the fact that the text can be upstaged by the staging: in theatre, space and place are integral to the creation of meaning. For academic geographers, the opportunity to work with context to shape the meaning and reception of a text has been a fascinating experience. The play was created as a site-specific installation at Chapel Arts in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. A former funeral home, the ground level of this building consists of a series of rooms formerly used for the business of processing the dead (e.g., garages

for delivery and removal of bodies, an embalming room, etc.). A gracious stairway leads to a more formal area upstairs. As we staged the play, the audience moved in small groups through seven different spaces to witness eleven scenes (Figure 2).

Employers' monologues were delivered upstairs in a more conventional theatrical setting, which included seating and elaborate theatrical lighting; testimonies of domestic workers and their children (in one scene, a representative of Citizenship and Immigration Canada is also present) were delivered downstairs, where audience members moved in groups of eighteen through a series of small, rather uncomfortable rooms, with more naturalistic and minimal staging.² At a PWC community assessment after the event, one community activist spoke of “*feel[ing]* the contrast – you know, the damp, the dark atmosphere downstairs, the cold and no [theatrical] lighting. So when you go up: the luxurious, you know, the well-appointed rooms. So it was really the best portrayal of the two solitudes: of the slave-like conditions, and the richness of the society that exploits these women.” In one of the scenes downstairs, no testimony was delivered; rather, a model bedroom was recreated through a compilation of domestic workers' descriptions of their rooms in the homes of Canadian employers. After the play, audience members spoke of its impact. For example, an activist from the PWC recounted: “My son said that, for him, the one that impacted him the most was going into that bedroom because he felt it was so heavy. Like you couldn't breathe, and it was quiet but not at the same time because of all the noise [of water running through the pipes] and the air. And the darkness. So it made a lot of the stories we hear tangible and sort of ... you are stepping into their space.”

² Here too there was debate: the naturalism of the staging of domestic workers' testimony and the elaborate artifice or theatrical treatment of that of the employers could be read as reinforcing rather than revealing (colonial) histories of racial and class difference.

Figure 2: *Overview of scenes in Vancouver production, 4-8 February 2009*

Scene 1 Welcome to the archive: In the foyer the audience is divided into groups that move through the show in different sequences. Two computer stations are set up that allow audience members to browse websites of nanny agencies before the performance begins.

Employer Route: Audience is seated and views the four scenes from the same location.

Scene 2 Upstairs (Karen's kitchen): Testimony of two Canadian women in need of childcare.

Scene 3 Upstairs: (Living room): A woman describes the challenges of finding care for her elderly mother.

Scene 4 Upstairs (Bedroom): A conversation takes place between husband and wife, during which they unwittingly reveal various ways in which they are exploiting their domestic worker and violating the regulations of their contract with her.

Scene 5 Upstairs: A shadow play. No testimony.

Domestic Worker Route: Audience moves to different rooms for scenes 6-10.

Scene 6 Downstairs (Kitchen): A domestic worker's story of leaving the Philippines

Scene 7 Downstairs (Garage): A domestic worker describes her experiences while employed in the LCP.

Scene 8 Downstairs (Sound room): Mother's and children's voices talking about period of family separation, when mother is working in Vancouver as a migrant domestic worker and children remain in the Philippines. This is the only testimony given directly by domestic workers and their children without use of professional actors.

Scene 9 Downstairs: Replica of Domestic Worker's bedroom in which audience members are left to explore on their own.

Scene 10 Downstairs: (Invented) testimony of a representative of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), in which he explains the program and its justification, followed by testimony of youth from a verbatim research transcript. CIC agent and youth face off at opposite ends of a long, twenty-foot table.

Scene 11 Talkback session.



Figure 3. Ligaya (Hazel Venzon) delivering her testimony among audience members.
Photograph by Caleb Johnston.

The spatial arrangements also forced audience members into close proximity with each other and with the actors. Over the thirteen shows in Vancouver, almost six hundred people saw the play, but each saw it in intimate circumstances, in small groups, often within arm's-length of the actors. This physical proximity not only brought audience members close to the person telling her story but also made the audience highly visible. We hoped, for example, that seeing their reflection in the mirror as Ligaya told of her reasons for leaving the Philippines and of her hopes for the future (Figure 3) would prompt audience members to reflect upon their direct and indirect complicity in a temporary work visa program that benefits so many middle-class Canadians. At the same time, four groups simultaneously moved through the rooms and scenes in different orders, suggesting an openness to the experience and an interpretation that exceeds a linear narrative structure.



Figure 4. Carlo Sayo (Filipino- Canadian Youth Alliance), Geraldine Pratt facilitating a talkback session. Photograph by Caleb Johnston.

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the eventfulness of theatre is the opportunity it creates to stage public conversations between people who would not ordinarily speak to each other on an equal footing: domestic workers with employers, nanny agents with community activists, childcare activists with Philippine community activists, local government officials with domestic workers. We used some of our funding to ensure that at least five domestic workers and their family members attended each performance. On feedback surveys, a good number of audience members reported that moving through the performances with people who evidently had come through the LCP themselves was deeply moving and altered the meaning of the play for them. Further, after each performance, audience members had the opportunity to speak to each other directly in a talkback session facilitated by Pratt and a representative from our community collaborators (Figure 4). Each talkback session was different, but brief extracts from one such conversation that took place in Vancouver give a sense of the possibilities.

Female audience member 1: We have a live-in nanny and she's wonderful ... My seven-year-old's job is to jump up from the dinner table and drag her from the kitchen ... I wonder if there is some way, like some culturally appropriate way, that I can say that it's really okay to stop working at six. Because I want to be a good employer. Like, the guilt associated with this show tonight, oh my god [laughing].

Member of Filipino Youth Alliance: [Explains deskilling of professionals.]

Female audience member 1: It is very evident to me that she is skilled.

Female audience member 2: I'm half Filipino and half Canadian. My mom came here, and of course I'm very Canadian. As my sixteen-year-old says, "The only Filipino thing about you is your mother." [Explains at some length that what she identifies as the white empowerment model is not culturally appropriate:] I was raised by a Filipino mother to take pride in my work: whatever your job is, you keep a smile on your face and just motor on ... What I mean is, help them to acculturate, help them to understand.

Member of PWC: [Explains that it is an issue of knowing one's rights and speaks about work of PWC.]

Female audience member 1: This is helpful. Like, I guess I feel a little more comfortable because I asked her [domestic worker] what her long-term goal was. I tried to sign her up for courses and pay for her time and that sort of thing.

The conversation then moved to family separation, and a domestic worker from the audience told of her experience of not being able to sponsor her eldest son as an immigrant to Canada:³

It was only when I finished the twenty-four months, and then I processed the papers, I read there: "Oh, my god, my eldest son cannot ... he doesn't qualify. We will be separated forever unless I go home and see him there. It's the only way.

Female audience member 1: Did someone say there are workshops in Tagalog because I would hate for this to happen to my nanny.

Domestic worker in audience: That's true.

A second domestic worker in the audience describes a similar experience undergone by her friend.

³ At age 22 a child is no longer considered by the Canadian government to be a dependent and cannot be sponsored by their parents. There are two exceptions: if they have remained in full-time education or have been financially supported by their parents because of disability.

...

Female audience member 1: [When domestic workers] phone back home do they say, “Canada’s better” or do they say, “This really sucks” and tell everyone they know not to come to Canada because they’ve been lied to, or exploited, taken advantage of, the structure of the thing sucks: “I got tricked, my sick kid can’t come when everyone else can.” So like, isn’t there some kind of word of mouth or some kind of awareness? Journalistic coverage? Something?

Facilitator: Maybe that is something we can ask to some of the people who have been through the program. What do you tell your family back home? ...

Much happened in this short conversation: community activists were able to challenge a cultural interpretation of Filipina self-exploitation and shift the focus to knowing employment rights.

Even more striking, after hearing more personal testimony from domestic workers in the audience, an audience member who currently employed a domestic worker moved from simply wanting to be a good employer to asserting that the “structure of the thing sucks.” Taking place after each and every performance, the talkbacks were serious moments of learning and civic engagement.

It is impossible for us to estimate the impact of attending *Nanay*. That said, we believe that, while it was a liminal event, the effects of the production were carried away from the performance in ways that are unpredictable and that cannot be calculated. We do know that we were able to train three young Filipinos – two as assistant directors and one as an assistant stage manager – to carry on cultural work such as this. The project also enabled us to direct financial resources to the PWC and to connect Filipino activists to funding officers and cultural presenters in the city. Perhaps most significantly, the play and its talkback sessions provided a site of intimate encounter that furthered an important public discussion between people with very different relationships to the issue of care. We take heart from an e-mail that the director received after the event: “I loved *Nanay* ... I also had a great group with me, which certainly made the talkback more intense. Even afterwards, different advocacy group members were

shaking hands and planning meetings with one another, and if that's not live theatre ...” Although “knowledge translation initiative” is a sterile bureaucratic phrase that does not begin to capture the productive learning involved, translating research into *Nanay* has been a remarkable opportunity for bringing academic research to a diverse audience in order to generate critical reflection and a wide-ranging public debate about care work, and the ethics and politics of temporary migration programs.